

A Night on the Flight Line, Part I

It was a late summer day in 1993 at Dover AFB, DE and I had just arrived at work. It was 1427. Not 1415. Not 1432. 1427. I always precisely timed my arrival so that when I got to work, it would only be a couple of minutes before roll call. Why, you may ask? Because if I arrived any earlier, I might be asked to do some work before my shift started. I learned this lesson a year and a half earlier when I foolishly arrived at work around 1410. Seeing me milling about the tables and benches of our old hangar, MSgt. Dowdy asked if I would clean the bathroom since dayshift "forgot" to do it. Yeah, sure. Half of dayshift was still out on the flightline, and the ones who normally hung out in the break area had blown it off and gone home. Still, I had been "asked" to clean the bathroom and when you're an airman you don't question polite requests. You can, however, learn from your mistakes and avoid picking up the slack for poor, lazy management in the future.

Anyway, 1430 rolled around and it was time for roll call. During the early '90s, we held our roll calls between two temporary structures built inside a massive hangar. Each of these two story buildings housed an AMU, or Aircraft Maintenance Unit. I was with the Blue Wizards and my flight was Wizard 6. The other AMU was the Red Dragons, whose swing-shift started an hour later than ours did. Yes, I know those nicknames are stupid, but we had nothing to do with it. When I first arrived, we were known by our radio call sign: Sierra. Shortly after, we were split into two AMUs during the Total Quality Maintenance craze of the early '90s and designated "Blue" and "Red." Both AMUs were organized under the newly renamed 436th Aircraft Generation Squadron. The Wizards and Dragons nonsense was the brainchild of an outside troubleshooter named Col. Frenchie. He figured that having these goofy nicknames would foster pride and inspire healthy competition between the two AMUs. Eventually, the silliness reached its inevitable conclusion when an idea for a third AMU, meant to collect all of the civilians and Air Reserve Technicians under one roof, was tentatively named the White Knights. A few influential African-American NCOS finally raised the bullshit flag and we reverted back to the far more sensible "Blue" and "Red" AMUs.

So, we're standing at roll call, but instead of the usual briefing about various issues that were always "HOT," a portly Captain stepped forward and introduced himself as some sort of mid-level functionary in our unit. I don't really remember what his job was. All I know is that he was a standard-issue generic officer with a handheld radio and a clipboard. He gave the requisite welcome speech with all of the forgettable boilerplate that all officers spouted off when they assumed command of something. The only part of his spiel that I remember was his final thought, since it was so odd. He said, "Let's remember to have fun out there. If you're not having fun, something's wrong."

You almost felt sorry for these guys. They were nice people who I think genuinely wanted to do good, but Dover could turn even the most idealistic man to the Dark Side. I believe that if Buddha himself were stationed at Dover, he'd soon be a bitter, chain-smoking alcoholic whose only release from living death would be cheap booze and easy broads. Capt. Portly was no exception. Within six months, he'd been Dover-ized. He became an angry, little fat man who seemed more worried about maintenance of weight standards (Pot-Kettle-Black) than maintenance of aircraft. He eventually left, as all officers do, except in this case he was gone before his two year slum tour was up. Rumor had it that he was caught having fun with a pretty blonde airman from Dragon side.

Capt. Portly finished his speech and our civilian shift leader, Mr. MysteryTour, stepped forward and read off the aircraft assignments. The guys who weren't assigned to a plane went outside to smoke or went into the breakroom to hang out until needed. Now, that breakroom deserves a story itself. When the temporary buildings were first erected, the breakroom was just a large, open room on the bottom floor. It had some square tables and chairs, but that was about it.

Col. Frenchie, the erstwhile troubleshooter, noticed that these square tables and chairs were conducive to card-playing, so he ordered furniture whose style was best described as "MacDonaldland." He had turned our breakroom into a fast-food restaurant, minus the food counter. We even had the swivel-chairs. You see, col.

Frenchie figured that if the furniture was awkward and uncomfortable, we would rather stay out and work on the airplanes than sit around inside and play cards. Col. Frenchie had made a critical error that would prove his undoing: He underestimated the common aircraft maintainer. We're trained to troubleshoot and solve problems. We're taught to overcome obstacles and do anything to get the job done. We weren't going to let some MacDonaldland furniture prevent us from enjoying our birthright. Within two weeks, Col. Frenchie was dismayed to find the breakroom was still full of loud, raucous mechanics engaged in various games of Spades, Hearts, and Pinochle. We had improvised, adapted, and overcome. Col. Frenchie disappeared a couple of weeks later, presumably to meddle in the affairs of some other unit with which he had no familiarity.

I stepped into the modified blue step-van that served as our primary conveyance between the hangar and the flightline. Dragon side had all their planes parked right in front of the hangar, so they could just walk right on out to their planes, but our planes were parked down at the far, far end of the ramp. If you wanted, you could use the Shoe Leather Express, but walking half-a-mile with a 75 lb. toolbox on your shoulder was not the best way to start your shift. Mr. MysteryTour, besides being our shift supervisor, was also the truck driver, call-sign "Wizard-6." We loaded everyone up and started the journey to our side of the flightline. Mr. MysteryTour, oblivious to the fact that the shortest distance between any two points is a straight line, almost always took a lazy, meandering route to the flightline. As he was driving, various people out on the planes would call him on the radio, triggering his instinct to turn the wheel and head off in their direction before telling them that he couldn't make it. He'd then turn the wheel in the other direction, thus closing the circle and heading off on his original course. Depending on radio traffic, it could take anywhere from five minutes to an hour to make it to your plane while aboard the Magical Mystery Tour.

Mr. MysteryTour finally pulled up to my plane. I hauled my toolbox out of the truck and made my way toward the Crew Entry Door, being careful not to walk in front of the truck, because MysteryTour had a habit of running over airmen as he absent-mindedly careened about the flight line. He'd already taken out at least two airmen and I had no intention being next up on the hit parade.

As I carried my toolbox to the plane, I could see the telltale omens signaling a rough night: numerous panels littered the ground about the plane, B-5 and B-2 stands were pre-positioned all over the place, and the dayshift guy walked towards me with a look of both defeat and joy at my arrival.

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